



საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობების კვლევის ფონდი
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**Clinton-Yeltsin Conversation Recordings – What Conclusions Can be Drawn
about the Foreign Policy Views of Yeltsin’s Russia?**

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In September 2018 the Clinton Presidential Library published the recordings of meetings and telephone conversations between the President of the United States, Bill Clinton, and the President of the Russian Federation, Boris Yeltsin. The materials which were, until now, classified, describe the positions of the Presidents of these two countries on various important issues and are, therefore, quite interesting and valuable, especially for those researching US-Russia relations.

Below we will review parts of the published materials covering the period from 1996 to 1999. In the beginning, we will outline several important aspects from US-Russia relations in that period of time as the aforementioned published documents give additional valuable information about the issue. Afterwards, we will attempt to analyze the positions stated by President Yeltsin on topics that are very important to Georgia's national security to this day.

Several Important Aspects from 1996-1999 US-Russia Relations

Given the fact that US-Russia relations in the 1990s have been studied quite well, the



published materials do not provide much of an opportunity to make assessments which have been previously unheard; however, they do provide rather valuable additional information which could help create a more precise image of both US-Russia relations as well as certain aspects of Russia's domestic and foreign policies:

- It would seem that over the years, a rather close personal relationship was formed between Clinton and Yeltsin which fostered the development of relations between the two countries. Overall, it can be said that US support had great importance for both Yeltsin's political career as well as for the Russian Federation which was experiencing serious fluctuations at that time.
- Despite severe domestic problems, Russia was still trying to present itself as an equal partner to the United States. Yeltsin quite clearly outlined Russia's foreign policy interests and in a number of cases emphasized that the US and Russia could tackle the greatest problems facing the world together.

- It is being confirmed that the issue of Kosovo did become a cause of serious contention between the two countries. Both before the military operation in Serbia as well as after it, Yeltsin was trying to be actively involved in resolving the problem. He had direct contacts with Milosevic's government and was attempting to take on the role of mediator. Yeltsin was categorically opposed to a NATO intervention against Milosevic¹ and considered the launch of a military operation to be a huge mistake as he believed that the US and NATO had failed to calculate the results and that Milosevic would not give up.² Even though at first Moscow's position seemed quite rigid, ultimately Russia came to terms with the West's decision without any serious complications. The issue was not raised in Clinton-Yeltsin relations afterwards.
- There appears to be an agreement of positions around other important issues on the international agenda at that time. This also concerns important countries from difficult regions such as the Middle East; more specifically, Iran and Iraq. It should also be pointed out here that the international political agenda regarding these regions was still being determined by the United States while Russia shared it on an official level and tried to foster the implementation of these policies.
- One of the directions of contemporary Russian foreign policy, which means deepening relations with other great powers in order to balance the US, was established back in the second half of the 1990s when Yevgeny Primakov was appointed to the position of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia. Beginning from this period, Russia better perceived the importance of ties with big Asian countries and launched intensive relations with China and India. Despite the fact that the US had declared support to this aspect of Russia's foreign policy, Moscow still had certain doubts that the United States was trying to undermine its foreign policy in this regard.³
- In bilateral relations it often happened that Yeltsin would ask for declared US political support in one form or another. For example, this could be about Russia's request to join the G7.⁴ However, most often Yeltsin asked for additional funding from the International Monetary Fund or the postponement of already existing debts. It is visible that getting financial support at that time was vital not only for the stability of the regime but for Russia in general. Today's Russia portrays this as if external debt was being used to pressure it and extort concessions.

¹ Memorandum of telephone conversation. Date & time: June 15, 1998, 1:21 p.m. - 1:57 p.m.

² Memorandum of telephone conversation. Date & time: April 19, 1999, 9:30 a.m. - 10:13 a.m.

³ Memorandum of telephone conversation. Date & time: November 22, 1997, 9:00 a.m. - 9:43 a.m.

⁴ Memorandum of conversation. Luncheon Meeting with Russian President Boris Yeltsin. Date & time: April 21, 1996, 12:50p.m. - 2:15 p.m. Place: The Kremlin.

- Yeltsin claimed that US political support would foster the strengthening of positions of the Russian President domestically which was necessary for continuing reforms in the country and democratization. Without this, there were indications made about the threat of the strengthening of radical opposition forces in Russia. The same is characteristic of Putin's Russia today; however, this threat is now being presented to the international community through the use of much more subtle and refined political technologies.

President Yeltsin's Stated Positions about Issues Important to Georgia's National Security

Part of the published documents that cover the period of 1996-1999 gives us the opportunity to draw some conclusions regarding the issues important to Georgia's national security. Above all, Russia's ambitions in the post-Soviet area must be considered to be among such issues. We see President Yeltsin's rather noteworthy positions about this topic in several places, making Russia's plans and attitudes towards the post-Soviet states quite clear.

Shortly, in the next few days, you will have a meeting with Mr. Putin. Briefly at this time, I would like to tell you about him so you will know what kind of man he is. It took me a lot of time to think who might be the next Russian president in the year 2000. Unfortunately, at that time, I could not find any sitting candidate. Finally, I came across him, that is, Putin, and I explored his bio, his interests, his acquaintances, and so on and so forth. I found out he is a solid man who is kept well abreast of various subjects under his purview. At the same time, he is thorough and strong, very sociable. And he can easily have good relations and contact with people who are his partners. I am sure you will find him to be a highly qualified partner. I am very much convinced that he will be supported as a candidate in the year 2000. We are working on it accordingly. (S)

Yeltsin's hint that Russia had plans for forming an organization similar to the European Union in the post-Soviet space, for example, is an interesting one. It is worth noting that Yeltsin talked about this in the context of signing the April 1996 agreement⁵ on creating a commonwealth with Belarus, pointing out that the same processes were taking place at a lower level with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.⁶ Hence, it is confirmed that Russia did not like the level of integration that the post-Soviet states had at that time and was already thinking of activating new mechanisms.

The project of the Eurasian Economic Union, created in 2011, was just such a mechanism. At this stage, this project has not brought actual results for Russia either, one of the main reasons being that Russia has failed to get Ukraine to join the Union. Vladimir Putin himself expressed his position about the special importance of involving Ukraine in the

⁵ Ultimately this process was completed by the creation of the Russia-Belarus allied state.

⁶ Memorandum of conversation. Luncheon Meeting with Russian President Boris Yeltsin. Date & time: April 21, 1996, 12:50 p.m. - 2:15 p.m. Place: The Kremlin.

Eurasian Economic Union in November 2011, during his speech at the Valdai Discussion Club.⁷ It must be noted that such statements have not been made about other states.

Giving special importance to Ukraine is also confirmed from the published recordings of Clinton-Yeltsin conversations. In his talks with Clinton, Yeltsin most often touches upon the issues concerning Ukraine while other countries, including Georgia, are only mentioned briefly, in a single context, and clustered with several other countries.

We can bring several more examples to confirm that Yeltsin's Russia considered the post-Soviet area as a zone of its exclusive influence. Specifically, during one of the meetings Yeltsin states that it is a problem for Russia that US military maneuvers are held in Crimea's coastal space. Here we also see a clear indication to the zones of influence – a parallel is drawn to a possible start of Russia's military exercises in Cuba which, according to Yeltsin's position, would be just as unacceptable to the US as exercises held in Crimea were for Russia.⁸

Clearly, it is not only the US military presence that is unacceptable for Russia but other types of activities as well. Among them, for example, the placement of official representatives of the US intelligence agencies in CIS countries is also assessed by Yeltsin to be a step taken against Russia.⁹

From the materials published regarding the period of 1996-1999, the clearest presentation of the Russian position takes place during the March 1997 Helsinki meeting where a discussion was held regarding NATO enlargement. During this meeting, Yeltsin directly states that the integration of post-Soviet republics in NATO is unacceptable for Russia. He insists on guarantees that such a thing will not happen. Despite numerous attempts to get at least a verbal promise from President Clinton about this, including the issue that post-Soviet republics would not be in the first wave of NATO enlargement, Yeltsin failed to reach the desired result – according to President Clinton's assessment, such a deal with Moscow is unacceptable due to various factors, including the fact that this would mean returning to the realities of the Cold War.¹⁰

⁷ Fiona Hill and Clifford G. Gaddy. "Mr. Putin – operative in the Kremlin." Paperback edition 2015, p. 248.

⁸ Memorandum of conversation. Morning meeting with Russian President Yeltsin: NATO-Russia, START, ABM/TMD. Date & time: March 21, 1997, 9:50 a.m. - 11:55 a.m. Place: Finnish President's Residence, Helsinki.

⁹ Memorandum of telephone conversation. Date & time: April 6, 1998, 10:01 - 10:28.

¹⁰ Memorandum of conversation. Morning meeting with Russian President Yeltsin: NATO-Russia, START, ABM/TMD. Date & time: March 21, 1997, 9:50 a.m. - 11:55 a.m. Place: Finnish President's Residence, Helsinki.

The recording of the conversation shows that the US President is not taking Yeltsin's arguments seriously which is understandable given the numerous conditions existing at the time such as Russia's domestic political context, for example. At this stage, Yeltsin's political career is almost over. The process of handing power over to Putin has begun which Yeltsin later confirms during the same meeting with Clinton. On the other hand, this factor gives him the opportunity of stating his opinions about Russia's foreign policy ambitions more clearly and openly.



As a conclusion, we can say that the differences between Yeltsin's Russia and Putin's Russia are quite clear on many topics. This, above all, concerns Russia's domestic politics where Putin's "power vertical" is much more robust. Also, Putin's Russia's activities on the foreign policy arena have sharply increased, including and especially with regard to gross violations of international legal norms and the use of military means for implementing Russian plans. However, if we assess foreign policy ambitions and views, it becomes quite clear that in this regard, there are few differences. In reality, Yeltsin's Russia also considered itself a superpower, was trying to mark its zones of influence and viewed international relations in terms of confrontations between various blocs.